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TAGS: ELAB KDEM PGOV TS

SUBJECT: WITHER LABOR INDEPENDENCE? THE UGTT ELECTIONS

REF: A. TUNIS 2844

1B. TUNIS 1155

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. As Tunisia's single labor confederation enters the final days before its December 14-16 congress to elect new leadership, labor activists continue to express their concerns that the results will indicate continued GOT influence over key officials. The General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) is expected to reelect Secretary General Abdessalem Jerad, who labor activists and observers believe receives instructions from the highest levels of the GOT. Further, Jerad and other leaders are accused of manipulating UGTT finances to their advantage. As the largest civil society organization in Tunisia, and arguably the most democratic domestic entity, observers lament the fact that GOT influence appears insurmountable. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) From December 14 to 16, Tunisia's sole domestic labor confederation, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), will hold its twenty-first Congress. The UGTT is believed to have over a million members (approximately ten percent of the total population), including some who are fiercely critical of the government. In addition to outlining its achievements since the last Congress and announcing its objectives for the coming five-year period, Congress deputies will elect thirteen governing board members, including a secretary general. Current UGTT Secretary General Abdessalem Jerad, who is regarded as loyal to President Ben Ali, is expected to be reelected.

13. (C) The December scheduling was the first indication, say labor activists, of GOT efforts to control the confederation. The Congress was expected to be convened in February 2007, five years after the 2002 Djerba Congress. However, UGTT Assistant Secretary General Abdennour Meddahi told LabOff that SYG Jerad unexpectedly announced the change, apparently after receiving "instructions" from the GOT. Meddahi said Executive Council members then accordingly amended UGTT regulations on scheduling the congress. Former labor activist and Secretary General of the opposition Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties party (FDTL) Mustapha Ben Jaafar explained to LabOff that advancing the Congress is one way of preventing independent candidates from gaining sufficient support in the elections, as they would not have enough time to campaign.

14. (C) Despite the short notice, fifty-five candidates have declared their intention to run for the thirteen Executive Council seats. However, observers expect most of the same individuals will be reelected to the highest UGTT body, despite the fact that many Executive Council members seem out of touch with UGTT membership. Former UGTT official Habib Guiza lamented to LabOff, "How can they represent workers

when they are all retired?!" (NOTE: Believing this is a popular sentiment, Guiza is planning to launch a parallel labor organization in the coming months. END NOTE.) One way the leadership maintains control is by restricting access to the Congress. Unless a candidate is one of 465 Congress delegates, candidates are not allowed to enter the hotel where the Congress is held. This, said Labor Union of Arab Maghreb Workers (USTMA) Assistant Secretary General Abdelmajid Sahraoui, himself a candidate, prevents independents from lobbying delegates for support and effectively ensures current leadership will be reelected. Sahraoui and others fully expect that SYG Jerad will continue to control the Executive Council with a majority (7) of loyal members.

¶5. (C) Jerad's continued influence results from the fine line between independence and allegiance to the GOT that he has walked over the past five years. The UGTT has taken some decisions defying the GOT, such as refusing to fill parliamentary seats reserved for labor (Ref B and previous). However, at the same time, Jerad has bowed to GOT pressure to cancel worker strikes and accept limited wage increases. Jerad has also accepted significant financial support from the GOT. According to Meddahi, the UGTT under Jerad's leadership has received 200,000 Tunisian dinars a month (over USD 150,000) from the national retirement fund to finance its activities. Meddahi claimed that Jerad distributed these funds to supporters nationwide (including to those who "spontaneously" cheer for Ben Ali at public events), funded his own foreign travel unrelated to the UGTT, and hosted banquets and other lavish events. Tunisian Journalists' Union head Lotfi Hajji (Ref A) told LabOff that these financial benefits ensure labor leaders are no longer willing to represent a truly independent voice in society. Additionally, Ben Jaafar said that such funds are used to "buy votes" in advance of the Congress, to ensure the UGTT leadership remains loyal to the government.

¶6. (C) While all expect the UGTT will continue to be influenced by the GOT, new legislation ensures that the current leadership's control will eventually come to an end. Meddahi told LabOff that newly implemented two-term limits for UGTT Executive Council members is causing great concern in the GOT, as all current members -- if reelected at the Congress -- will have to step down in 2011. Hajji explained that independent members of the Executive Board pushed through the term limits, despite objections from pro-GOT members, including Jerad.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Developments like these demonstrate the intricacies of the UGTT. While UGTT independence may be limited, nonetheless commitment to the core labor values of democracy and transparency at times seems to prevail over financial or political benefits. In fact, despite the leadership's pro-government stance, the UGTT is almost universally recognized as the most democratic Tunisian organization. In the colonial period, the UGTT fought for Tunisia's independence and ensured workers' rights were protected. Today, many say that the UGTT is only a shadow of its former self. As the UGTT celebrates its sixtieth anniversary, USTMA Executive Director Mustapha Tlili notes, "Isn't sixty the mandatory retirement age?" In the face of growing GOT control over civil society, Tunisia can only hope that workers will fight to save the organization that once was. END COMMENT.

GODEC